

## ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN THE RETEZAT NATIONAL PARK

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### Abstract

*Sustainable development means "Think global but act local" (David Brower the founder of the nongovernmental organization Friends of the Earth 1969). Lasting tourism is considered in most of the cases a tourism manner, but all the touristy activities should be durable and bring economic and social benefices to local communities and to encourage the conservation with nature. On the international level, many destinations have chosen to promote ecotourism in order to improve the problems regarding the environment, and for to encouraging the area development. This kind of tourism encourages the responsible behavior of the tourists, local culture and appreciation for the traditional way of living, the conservation of some habitats and ecosystems and brings ways of sustainable development for local communities situated in natural areas with infrastructure problems.*

*Ecotourism is the most recommended one in the protected areas, because the local resources can be advantageous used without causing the degradation of the area. The Retezat National Park is the first park founded in Romania and has a remarkable tourism potential, insufficiently exploited and many times deteriorated by applying an inadequate tourism to a protected area. Ecotourism can bring socio-economic development for the communities round the park, natural and cultural potential capitalization in the area and can be a catalyzing for a sustainable development of tourism and nature conservation. For the development of this kind of tourism the administration efforts of the park, authorities and local communities should be directed to sustainable forms of development and the adjustment of touristy infrastructure of ecotourism requirements.*

**Key words:** ecotourism, sustenaible development, strategies, Retezat National Park.

**JEL classification:** L83, Q01, Q26.

### 1. FOREWORD

Sustainable development of tourism is defined by World Tourism Organisation (WTO), Tourism Council (WTTC), and by the Earth Council as: "Sustainable development of tourism satisfies the actual needs of tourists and of the host regions and in the same time protects and increases the future opportunities". Tourism is considered to be a factor that leads towards a management of all the resources in a way that economic, social, and esthetic necessities can be satisfied, preserving in the same time cultural integrity, essential ecologic processes, biological diversity and retaining systems of life. The products of sustainable development are products that are being operated in harmony with the surrounding, community and local cultures in a way that these are in fact the beneficiaries and not victims of the tourism development.

Some specialists prefer to talk rather about sustainable development of tourism than sustainable tourism for at least two reasons: one would be that for assuring a sustainable tourism, the integration in all development aspects is required, and the second one is that some components of tourism such as air transport on long distances, may not be durable, in actual technology conditions, even with the use of the best practices.

Confusions are often coming across between sustainable tourism and ecotourism, but the former even though it respects sustainable development principles it refers to that tourism generally practiced, in natural protected areas, in small groups, capitalizing the natural patrimony as well as the cultural one, bringing benefices to the local communities. Ecotourism comes out like a miraculous solution to the problems that appeared in the same time with mass tourism development, because it combines harmoniously economic development with the nature protection and brings out benefices to local communities<sup>1</sup>.

Ecotourism must include the following elements: the product needs to rely on the nature and its elements, an ecologic management for a minimum impact, to contribute to the conservation of the biodiversity, to contribute to the welfare of the communities from the touristy areas, to realize the ecologic education among tourists and local population. These elements have constituted the basis

for defining ecotourism, unanimously agreed in 2002 at Quebec (UNEP/WTO, 2002).

Tourism in the protected areas can offer new opportunities of development that should support conservation, keeping and improving the local patrimony. A special attention should be given to tourism that would lead to conservation and management of natural resources<sup>2</sup>. Also, tourism from the protected areas should have a positive contribution for the local economy through promoting the use of the local “work hand” and the encouragement of local traditional activities. Ecotourism remains the most recommended form of tourism for the protected areas.

## 2. TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RETEZAT NATIONAL PARK

Romania has approximately 800 acres of protected areas, which cover in present about 5% of the country's territory. The most of the ecotourist destinations are situated within or close to these protected areas, such as: Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation, the paradise of the birds, the northern communities of National Park of Piatra Craiului with ecotourist programs focused upon big carnivores (bears, wolves, shaves), National Park of Retezat entered in the Pan Park network or National Park of Apuseni with its old traditions connected to nature.

Retezat National Park is the first park created in Romania and one of the oldest in Eastern Europe. It was created in 1935 and it is planned to become the Biosphere Reservation because of its oneness of biodiversity and national significance that it has for Romanian people for, the first administrative desk of the park was created in 1999. The new management structure was supported through the Biodiversity Conservation Project. Newly, National Park became one of the areas that are protected by UNESCO. Retezat Mountains offer some of the most spectacular views in Romania and have a huge development potential of national and international tourism. The park is surrounded by the adequate infrastructure that

supplies the access to this protected area but also the easy access to the center of the park.

In present the park is annually visited only by 10.000 tourists<sup>3</sup>. Because half of these visitors come to park only during daytime, the park could absorb over two or three more times more visitors than in present without damaging the biodiversity integrity. Even though the park has now a relatively small impact upon regional economy, an important raise of the number of visitors would start positioning it as an important source of income and places to work.

The check-in possibilities are either within the park's territory or nearby to the entering points of the park. The check-in spaces are possessed by private owners or by the detour forest and have different check-in and services conditions, starting from mountain shelter regime (as Gentiana Shelter), and ending with three star check-in (Anita Pension, Iris, Rotunda Chalet). Chalets and Pensions, the great majority of them, have no continuous flux of clients.

Retezat National Park still needs to attract an impressive number of visitors. However, is natural that during the next decade the demand for access to the resources of the park and as well the economic contribution of the park to the surrounding area to grow. Although the management must always hint at long term protection of the park resources, the Retezat National Park administration is in the privileged position of attracting the ecotourism market, that means those tourists interested in the biodiversity conservation of the park, but in the same time it contributes to social and economical development at a local level.

Matter the visitors, in Retezat National Park more categories are distinguished, differentiated by the main interest<sup>4</sup>, as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Tardif, J., *Écotourisme et développement durable*, *Vertigo - La revue en sciences de l'environnement sur le WEB*, Vol 4 No 1, May 2003

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.carnivoremari.ro/rezervatii/turism-in-arii-protejate.html>

<sup>3</sup> MacGregor, J., Blumer, A., *Strategie for a Sustainable Tourism Development in Retezat National Park Region*, 2006

<sup>4</sup> \*\*\* Management Plan of Retezat National Park

**Table 1. Main Visitors Categories in Retezat National Park**

No.	Visitors Category	The most used areas	Major interest
1.	Mountain tourists	Cârnic, Buta, Gura Zlata – the most frequent access	Several days trips sometimes with camping, recreation
2.	Alpinists	Pereții Bucurei, Pereții Judele, Colții Pelegii	Alpinism
3.	Researchers	Scientifical Reservation Whole Protection Area	Documentation Research
4.	Fishermen	Râul Mare Valey, Râu Bărbat Valey, Râu Șes Vaey, Lăpușnicul Mare Valey, Gura Apei Acumulation Lake	Trout fishing
5.	Cars Visitors	Râul Mare Valey, Nucșorii – Cârnic Valey, Lăpușnicul Mare Valey, Weat Jiu Valey, Buții Keys	Rest/Recreation frequently combined with a picnic to a camping or at a chalet.

### 3. MAIN CAPITALIZATION POSSIBILITIES OF THE ECOTOURISM POTENTIAL IN RETEZAT NATIONAL PARK

Retezat National Park and the surrounding area, including Hateg area, could become one of the main ecotouristic destinations in Romania. The spectacular alpine and subalpine views and the huge variety of fauna and flora (that gathers more than a third of the flora of Romania) give to the National Park an excellent resource mixture that can contribute to long-term development successfully of tourism in this area. A sustainable tourism industry development will need a partnership in the private sector and the park administration, that will integrate successfully historic and communitarian resources from surrounding area into natural resources of the park and transform them into a touristic complete product. It is crucial that the destination should be positioned in such a way that it will reflect the most exigent principles and practices of sustainable tourism inside but also outside of the park area.

The most promising market segments for Retezat National Park and surrounding region are ecotourists, geotourists, adventurers, tourists in search of historical heritage, and those in search of scientific and educational experiences. Romanian families and groups of students also have good potential and should be numerous among segments of the analyzed markets.

To attain the targets of development concerned, the region must position itself as the region that can satisfy the interests and desires of these specific market segments. Therefore Retezat region will be promoted as a single area due to its wildlife, with several villages and with a genuine heritage of ancient sites that offer opportunities for learning and discovery, inspiration, relaxation, exercise, moments of solitude, charm and challenges.

Retezat Park interest in developing tourism activities has strong links with ecotourism. Tourism provides natural ecotourism sustainable and responsible which is guided by ethical rules and practices specific respect for the natural (responsible travel by nature), support the long-term conservation of nature (a stream of income to help conserve biodiversity and culture) and contributions to improving the welfare of the local community (through participation in tourism activities).

Ecotourism activities are developed and promoted nationally by the Ecotourism Association of Romania (AER), which has developed an extensive program that aims at different areas of Romania. Among the areas covered include the Retezat, National Park Călimani, Apuseni National Park and the Danube Delta Biosphere Reservation.

Ecotourism Association of Romania (AER) implemented in 2006 Certification System for Ecotourism<sup>1</sup>. The system was developed, based on best practices at the international level such as The

Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation (*Australian Ecotourism Association*) and Nature's Best (*Swedish Ecotourism Association*).

The model adopted has been changed in accordance with the Romanian through a process of intense consultations with representatives of the private sector (for example, tour-operators, owners of the hostels), organizations of nature conservation (for example: World Wide Fund for Nature – WWF), national park administration or each individual park, the National Authority for Tourism, Ministry of Environment and Water Management.

Staff in the National Park Retezat was involved in the process since its initial phase. Until now 8 pensions in the park have already been ecocertified.

Ecotouristic industry development at the international level is meant to be an important and potentially positive factor for the park and its communities. Increasingly, many people choose ecotouristic destinations, seeking to engage in activities for the conservation of nature and promote traditional cultures and values and lifestyles.

National Park Retezat and the surrounding landscape have the potential to attract a large number of tourists interested in experimenting both the nature in the park and the rural culture in Romania. Many villages will use local (and guest houses) as a place of accommodation for the many trips a day to discover mountain landscapes, flora and fauna and the mountain range. If it is promoted as it should, its exceptional biodiversity suggests that Retezat National Park could become one of the most popular tourist destinations, natural, sustainable mountain area of Romania.

However, its relatively remote location and lack of air transportation with low costs and motorways, limited number of local and international tourists. In addition, specifics of the special geological Retezat National Park, incredible number of protected species and spectacular landscape is transformed into a major attraction both for those interested in the mountain and mountain landscapes, and for alpinists, bird lovers, geologists, botanic lovers.

Ecotourists comply with environmental factors and expects the tourism product suppliers to demonstrate that they respect the local environment and works respecting the environment principles. The success of positioning Retezat National Park as a potential eco-tourism destination will allow different products to differentiate from other national parks in Romania and Eastern Europe.

#### 4. ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN RETEZAT NATIONAL PARK

Retezat National Park has a base of resources that can be developed as one of the main landmarks in Hunedoara County. However, there are still many things to do in order to protect the park's natural resources, to position the park as a tourist attraction in the International Network of PAN Parks. The park needs a set of guidelines for development that can guide and control the quality of construction and to protect the environmental factors of the park. Special attention should be given to issues such as maintenance of pastures and using traditional building materials. The guidelines should also take into account the protection of ecology by promoting proper management of waste.

In the park there are many paths and could be developed many other routes to create more complete natural values in the area. We should develop a comprehensive system of paths able to designed more activities such as observing animals in the wild, mountain biking, trips to the cabin to cabin, climbing, etc.. The development of such a system should take into account the sensitive areas of the park, ecological and development plans need to be included in the management of the park.

Promoting tourism destination Retezat should be made by:

- Advertising in various media: on the website, brochures, etc.;
- Discounts and promotional campaigns: the development of a database and creating a system of public relations, information campaigns through letters and e-mails, presentations at fairs, and stall stands presentation, the preparation of DVDs and distributing them;
- Public Relations: newsletter, conferences and seminars, information center;
- Website of the region Retezat should be at the center of all activities for promotion. This page should not be confused with the official Internet page of the National Park Retezat, but must be a separate website to serve the interests of all tourism in the area.

This website should be widely promoted on the basis of a strategy that will lead visitors to the website. An integral component of the Website will be a technology capable of collecting information to request information from visitors to page through Internet contests and promotions. Website should be at the center of a comprehensive regional network of information, communication and promotion.

The current promotion materials should be consolidated into a single destination guide Retezat. This should include the following components:

- Natural and cultural resources;
- The current traditional lifestyle;
- Tourist information services;

- Possible recreation (trails and opportunities for observation of wild life and a calendar of special events published annually).

A receptive tour operator continues to be one of the most important elements by which new customers are attracted to the destination. In Sibiu and Timisoara are only 2-3 operators that promote opportunities in the region Retezat National Park. Operators that promote ecotourism, adventure travel and education should receive assistance in the following areas<sup>2</sup>:

- Market research;
- Planning and budgetary affairs;
- Development and the creation of tourism products and packages;
- Development of websites and databases;
- Strategically promoting.

Lack of significant ecotouristic packages can be overcome by implementing a sustained effort to create tourist itineraries ready to leave the market. It proposes that tourism products for ecotourists:

- Observing wild animals and photographic expedition;
- Hiking in areas with an untainted nature;
- School holidays;
- Observing birds;
- Photographic sent;
- Botanical tours and nature study;
- Scientific Research;
- Tours by region on skis;
- Agro and Rural Experiences;
- Cultural Tours;
- Cycling and mountain biking;
- Horseback riding.

The positioning of the region as a new ecotourist destination, Retezat will require the organization of intensive workshops, the short term to ensure competitive tourist destination. Should be concerned especially the following topics: development of tourism, promotion and e-marketing, training guides and interpreters. These regional workshops will complement those already proposed to be held in each zone.

In Retezat it can be remarked the absence of training courses for guides and the lack of certified guides. To attract international operators is essential that the region should have a certain number of certified guides. It is therefore necessary to organize a training program to complete all aspects of the teaching guide at the start and at the level of experienced guides. There are several areas that require a special training course for guides including:

- Ecology and biodiversity in the Carpathian area;
- History of Transylvania;
- The local and architectural patrimony.

It is also necessary the organization of several workshops for accommodation facilities at the local check-in level. The vast majority of them have to

cover the specific requirements of the region (for example for the development of guest houses), although they noted the need to organize a workshop to generically support a wide range of operations with facilities for accommodation, Hațeg of the hotels, to camping in National Park Retezat. The program may include topics such as:

- Hospitality and services for tourists;
- Accounting, Budget and analysis of capital flows;

- Practices acquisition;
- Safety and security;
- Insurance;
- Promotion.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

With the development of ecotourism, Retezat National Park can become a destination recognized nationally and internationally. Given that environmental issues are becoming increasingly important on the public agenda (especially in the countries of Europe and America that generate tourism), travel agencies are becoming more sensitive to both the increased interests regarding the natural and protected areas, and to the impact that tourists can have on these fragile environments, undivided forest ecosystems and wildlife. The private sector in partnership with the local administration will have to

successfully integrate natural resources, cultural and community in the region in a set of comprehensive tourism products to support the development of a sustainable tourism zone in the National Park Retezat.

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